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opening extract from

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THE WHITE HORSE TRICK

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The Bodley Head
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Part One

THE END

1

They came in the dead of night when the family was sleeping. If there had been any dogs left they might have heard the men approaching, but there weren't. There hadn't been dogs there for years. Who could afford to feed dogs? So the people had to listen for themselves in the night, and even though they all slept lightly, with one ear open, the violence of the wind and the rattling, gurgling torrents of rain engulfed the house in noise, and the sound of approaching footsteps was lost in the din.

The first things the family heard were the crash of the front door breaking down and the yelling of dangerous men as they burst in. It was a small house. There was no back door and nowhere to hide. The mother and her two children jumped out of their beds just as a heavy boot smashed through the door of the bedroom. A powerful beam of light blinded them all and made the children, who had never seen a working torch before, reverse into the corner, wailing in terror.

'Take whatever you want!' the woman said. 'There's

apples in the larder. Potatoes. Take everything, we won't stop you. Just leave us in peace!'

'We don't want your apples,' said a man's voice, deep and powerful, as though it came from an enormous chest. 'We only want the boy. Hand him over and there won't be any more trouble.'

'No.' The mother clung to her children, one arm around each of them. They gripped her hands and stared like night creatures into the light. When the torch beam dropped for a moment, they could see dark figures gathered behind it, huge ones, all of them slick and shiny from the rain.

'Don't be a fool,' the same man said.

'Get out of here!' the mother yelled. 'Leave us alone!' She pushed the children behind her into the corner and stood between them and the advancing men, as though her thin, frail body could possibly deter them from taking whatever they wanted. But she had to try. She had already lost too much.

'Just the boy.' The torch came closer, the dark, hulking figures of the men behind it.

'No. You're not having him.' Her husband had set out to search for firewood on a winter's morning three years ago. She had begged him not to go and she had been right to. He had never returned. He was dead in a ditch somewhere – killed for the firewood he had found or perhaps for nothing, just because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A year later, her elder son had slipped away in

the night and joined the army. She couldn't bear to lose his brother as well.

'Hand him over,' said the man. 'Commander's orders.' He was right in front of her. She could smell his breath, but because of the torch beam in her eyes she still couldn't see his face.

'But why? What do you want with him? You've already got my other boy.'

They took them young into the castle army, she knew that, but not this young. Billy had just turned seven. There was only one reason for taking him that she could think of, and that was to put him to work on the terraces. The idea filled her with horror. She would die before she would allow that to happen to him.

But the argument was over, and she was suddenly struggling with slippery waterproofs and the heavy men inside them. It was entirely useless. They pushed her aside, dragged Billy out of the desperate grip of his sister and took him, flailing and screaming, away with them. She tried to follow, but one of the men stayed behind to delay them. He stood in the doorway, as big and heavy as a boulder, and just as immovable. When the mother grew tired of fighting him, she went to the kitchen and picked up a heavy frying pan, but by the time she got back to the door he had gone out and closed it behind him, and was holding it to prevent her getting out.

She changed tactics and sneaked away to climb through a window, but the windows were small and

it took too long, and already it was far too late. The door-blocker had outwitted her and vanished into the darkness, and there was no way of knowing which way he had gone.

2

The other men, taking it in turns to carry Billy, were already far away, striding through the storm across the uneven surface of the Burren. From time to time one of them would slip or stumble and curse the rocky ground and the darkness, but they didn't turn on their torch, so Billy had no idea where he was being taken.

He was tucked under strong arms and draped over massive shoulders. He squirmed and kicked and punched, but he was wasting his energy. These men were too strong and too determined for him, and eventually he exhausted himself and submitted to captivity. For a long, long time the men walked on, neither ascending nor descending but keeping on fairly level ground and skirting sinister black lakes that glistened in the darkness like windows into hell. Gusts of wind rocked the men so hard that sometimes they lost their balance and their footing, and had to hang on to one another to stay upright. And sometimes, when the wind dropped for a minute, Billy would shout out, 'Where are you taking me?' or 'What are you going to do with me?'

But although the men mumbled and grumbled

to each other, none of them bothered to answer him.

The front door and the bedroom door were both broken, and the best Billy's mother could do in the darkness was to prop furniture against them to keep them closed. It wasn't enough to stop the wind from blowing in, though, and for most of the night the storm tore through the house, drenching everything it touched, and rattling and rocking and shaking and breaking anything that moved. There was no more sleep to be had for mother or daughter that night. They huddled together beneath a couple of damp blankets, reassuring each other as well as they could. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, the wind dropped quite suddenly, and left them feeling frightened and alone, listening to the silence.

Sometimes Billy's ribs hurt from lying over a brawny shoulder, and sometimes his back hurt because he was under someone's arm and his legs were dangling at the wrong angle, but none of the men ever carried him for very long, and every few minutes he was passed from one to another, so he could exchange one kind of cramp or pain for a different one. It felt to him as if his fear and discomfort would never end, but eventually he sensed that they had begun to go downhill, and a short time after that the storm gave one last violent heave, which almost knocked them all off their feet, and then decided to call it a day. The rain came at them from above instead of from

the sides. Then it, too, stopped, and the darkness all around them was suddenly silent and, just as suddenly, warm.

The man who was carrying Billy gave a great sigh and slapped him on the back in a way that was almost friendly.

'Nearly there now,' he said.

'Where?' said Billy. 'Nearly where now?'

But he got no answer, and no one spoke to him again. Their pace slowed as the terrain underfoot became more difficult, with bigger rocks and loose stones, and then the torch went on again, blinding Billy with its sudden brilliance. There was a lot of scuffling and grunting among the men, as though they were trying to manoeuvre something heavy, but he couldn't see what it was. He was pushed quickly through a narrow gap and on to some kind of floor; then he heard a door closing and more grunting, and then the sound of the men's footsteps departing.

'Hey!' he called out after them. 'What about me?'

There was no answer. Billy listened. He could hear the irregular dripping of rainwater from the roof, and something else as well. Someone breathing. His blood ran cold.

'Hello?' His voice was tight with fear.

'Hello,' said a voice. Another child, like him. It didn't sound nervous, or threatening either.

Billy let out his breath. 'What's happening?' he said. 'Where is this place?'

'We don't know,' said the child. 'All we know is that we're locked in here and we can't get out.'

3

At first light, the woman and her daughter set out for the castle to find out what had become of Billy. Their journey was a slow and cautious one. The storm might have ended but its aftermath still affected their progress. During the woman's lifetime the rainfall had increased so much that new lakes had developed. Some of them were temporary, and came and went depending on the rainfall, but others were more permanent and only dried up when, once every three or four years, there was a prolonged drought. These new lakes had changed the landscape, filling up every hollow and flooding the low points in the valleys. It meant that a lot of the old roads and paths had become blocked and new ways had to be found. So mother and daughter made for the high ground and followed the ridges of the hills wherever they could, staying just beneath the horizon so as not to be seen, because it was dangerous to be out and about in the wild places, by day as well as by night.

There were no trees or bushes to give cover, but the Burren was full of boulders and crevices, and as they

approached castle territory they slowed down and stayed low, and managed to creep from one hiding place to the next without being seen. When the notorious terraces came into view, they concealed themselves behind an outcrop of limestone and settled in to observe the scene. The mother knew what went on here and she wished she could prevent her daughter from seeing it, but it was too dangerous now for them to be separated and they had to find out whether Billy was there or not.

The castle stood on a broad shoulder of Sliabh Carran. To its west was a series of shallow cliffs known as the stony steps. To the north, the windowless face of the castle looked out over the sea, and on its opposite side, facing south, the hillside sloped gently down towards a shallow lake which had once been the meadows and woods at the foot of the great cliff called Eagle's Rock. It was on this slope that the terraces were being built.

The weather patterns had changed. Ireland had always had a wet and windy climate, but over the past few decades the storms had increased in frequency and severity, and now, throughout the whole region, the soil was being washed away; swept into streams and rivers and carried out to sea. The woman and her family were, in that respect, among the luckier ones. Their garden lay on a gentle slope, which was sheltered on two sides by high crags, and the lie of the land meant that most of the rainfall was channelled down one side of it. Even so, the rain washed the nutrients out of the soil faster than they could be replaced, and every

year the vegetables were smaller and harder to grow.

But at least they still had something. They were looking down now on the ones who had nothing; the poor souls whose farms and gardens had failed completely and who had been rounded up by the commander's army and brought here to work. The 'Social Welfare Project' is what the soldiers called it, but everyone knew that it was a labour camp, pure and simple, and that there was no prospect of any kind of life beyond it. People worked on it until they died. They were out there now, the old and the young, lugging rocks or baskets of soil, building walls, grinding stones for mortar. Almost everyone these days was thin, but these people were more than thin. They were just skin and bone; so emaciated that it was amazing they could still stand, let alone labour all day in the sun and the storms.

Indeed, it soon became clear that not all of them could. An old man staggered and sat down, resting the rock he was carrying in his lap as though it were too precious to drop. One of the soldiers on guard watched him, but he said and did nothing. The woman tore her eyes away from the scene and examined the children instead. They were working among the adults, doing the same jobs and wearing the same hopeless expressions. Their bodies were thin and stiff, with none of the grace and energy that children ought to have.

'Do you see him?' she whispered to her daughter.

'No. He's not there.'

'Right. I want you to wait here and stay out of sight. I won't be long.'

'Why? Where are you going?'

'To the barracks. I'm going to try and find out what's going on.'

But she paused a moment longer. The old man lay down on his back, the rock on his belly. He struggled to get up, but failed. The soldier prodded him with his boot, then bent down and pushed the rock off him. Still he didn't get up.

The worst of it was that all these suffering people were fighting a losing battle. What they were attempting to do was build a series of walls across the hill to hold in the soil and stop it from being washed away, but it was clear that they were failing. The storm of the previous night had left its mark on the works. There was a clear trail made by one of the raging streams that appeared all across the land whenever that kind of torrential rain fell. It had broken through walls and washed stones, even quite big ones, down the hillside. It had poured across the vegetable plots, uprooted plants and gouged out precious topsoil in long gaping gashes. There were still some crops remaining, mostly beans and beetroot and cabbage, but the plants were small and weedy and their leaves were yellow from the lack of goodness in the ground.

4

Billy slept, and when he woke up it was broad daylight. There were two other children in there – a girl of about his age and a boy who was a bit younger. Both of them were still asleep, so Billy set about examining the surroundings.

They were in a funny little house which seemed to be made out of plastic and tin. It had two rooms, one with beds in and another with sofas and a table, and a little old cooker and a sink, neither of which worked. Beside the bedroom was a tiny bathroom with a smelly toilet bucket and a basin of water. There were windows everywhere, but they were made of plastic and they were all scratched and cloudy. In any case, it seemed to Billy that they all looked out on to high stone walls, so there was nothing to be seen outside them anyway.

'What are we doing here?' he asked the others when they woke up. Neither of them knew. They just shrugged and yawned and scratched themselves.

'Well, I'm getting out,' Billy said.

The door was narrow and had more of that plastic

glass in the top half. Billy put his face up against it, but it was scratched like the others and he could see nothing outside except for vague grey shapes in a misty white gloom. The handle moved when Billy turned it, but there must have been some kind of lock on the outside, because the door wouldn't open. He pushed it with his shoulder and thumped on it with all his strength, but it wouldn't budge. He tried the windows next, tugging and hammering on the old fastenings, but they were rock-solid as well, as if they had rusted into place.

'It's no good,' said the girl. 'We've tried all that already. There's no way to get out.'

She didn't seem to be very upset about it, and nor did the young boy. 'It's not so bad,' he said. 'We don't have to work in the garden like we did at home.'

'And no housework or cooking,' said the girl. 'We get more food here, too.' She pointed to a large pot beside the sink. Billy opened it. It was full of stew – barley and beans from the look of it. 'They bring it every night.'

'I don't care,' said Billy. 'I hate them. I'm not going to eat their food.'

'That's what I said to begin with,' said the boy, 'but you'll eat it when you get hungry enough. There's nothing else to do.'

He took a worn and bent spoon out of his pocket and began to tuck in.